

## No worth in this system of death

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Editorial Page Editor

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Cal Coburn Brown is dead. We are no safer for it. Few will feel any satisfaction or fulfillment. The family of his victim, brutally raped and tortured by this twisted sadist, might feel some “closure” as the man who brought their suffering has his life taken by the state. But the crime was 19 years ago. Surely it is not forgotten, but the process of convicting, sentencing and executing the perpetrator took almost as long as his victim lived. Brown, who committed heinous crimes, who so cruelly took the life of young Holly Washa and left her mutilated body in a car trunk at SeaTac, spent a third of his life on death row, waiting to pay his penalty.

This practice, of doling out the death penalty only to a small, select group of murderers, then taking decades to carry out the sentence as every last nuance and dead end in the legal system is explored to exhaustion, as every conceivable excuse not to impose the sentence is fully vetted, makes the death penalty in Washington state a massive waste of time and resources. It provides the public no added safety. It is outrageously expensive, so much so that its costs far outweigh a life sentence and any county prosecutor with limited resources will hesitate to seek it. It is imposed with such inconsistency that any moral arguments are insupportable and best ignored. For the vast majority of this state’s convicted killers, and the worst of them, the death penalty was never more than a brief consideration, quickly discarded. Even if they are convicted of capital murder, the sentence more often than not is vacated by the courts.

So what good is the death penalty in Washington? None I can detect. We would be better off, financially and ethically, if it was discarded. I feel no remorse for Brown. I do not mourn him. I do not consider him a victim. At this stage, however, there is no real point in taking his life. Brown’s end is not worth the trouble.

We can review the usual arguments. Are would-be murderers deterred by Brown’s execution? Hardly. Study after study shows the issue doesn’t penetrate the warped mind of a killer, especially with the death penalty so rare. Is it cheaper to kill than incarcerate? Not at all, especially with each death sentenced followed by two decades of publicly funded appeals.

Is it just? How can it be, when it so inconsistent? Gary Ridgway, to use the Green River Killer as one egregious example, killed 50 women in his perverted after-work sport. He escaped execution because he pleaded guilty, and because the sheer volume of death his hobby produced made seeking his execution too great a legal burden. Less accomplished killers have weaker legal leverage. Or, if Brown had perpetrated his crime in Chelan or Douglas or Okanogan counties, chances are he would be alive today. Seeking the death penalty drains too many resources in any but the wealthiest counties, even with state assistance. Since statehood, no one convicted of murder in a North Central Washington county has been executed.

Moral principles lose all power when inconsistently and selectively applied. What is just for a Brown is not unjust for a Ridgway simply because his confession was more timely.

There is nothing left for justification but vengeance, what we now politely call “closure,” a desire that people who caused our suffering should suffer themselves. While the victims’ families and loved ones deserve our full sympathy, this is a very thin justification for a state burden as heavy as capital punishment. If vengeance is for some and not others equally pained, we must reconsider our motives.

Some of these arguments might change if punishment was swift, consistent and inerrant, but it can’t be, not as imperfect as we are.

To its credit, Washington is thoroughly squeamish about the death penalty. Even as Brown’s appointed hour neared, you had a sense that the state would just as soon pass. No satisfaction, no safety, great expense — we should give up the death penalty and move on.

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